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ABSTRACT

Second language students are often discouraged in trying to acquire oral fluency skills. Four specific problem areas are: (1) timidity; (2) listening comprehension difficulties; (3) oral reading problems; and (4) difficulty in putting sentences together. An approach that emphasizes writing skills avoids these problem areas and uses skills the students already possess in their native language. An exercise in which students are asked to write what they say as they speak in their native language helps the students visualize words with greater facility. In the next step, students write their speech as they speak in the target language. Parallel to this activity, students should practice writing in the target language. (AM)

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BREAKING THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE BARRIER WITH WRITING

BY

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As teachers of foreign languages, we must concern ourselves, ultimately, with helping our students to acquire fluency, by almost any standard we might care to define that term. Have we, as a profession, been honest with ourselves? Is it possible for the majority of our students to learn to actually think in the language, or is that merely a pipe dream?

LEARNING PROBLEMS

Identifying and describing our student's learning problems is a necessary preliminary to their solution. Personal experience suggests that students who encounter the most difficulties in speaking the foreign language often share several identifiable problems: (1) timidity; (2) difficulty understanding the spoken word in the foreign language; (3) difficulty pronouncing written words; (4) difficulty putting sentences together in the foreign language. I personally believe that all of these problems are linked to the student's ability to use his mother tongue, or his concept of that ability, whether real or imagined. For example, item numbers one and four above are reflected in some students' difficulty to enunciate a complete sentence in English. Their minds seem to jump from one idea

to another, randomly, rather than moving in a logical order through a sentence. When this difficulty is serious, these students may stutter. Timidity and self-consciousness are bound to result. It is very likely that students who feel inadequate about their ability to sight read in English, and particularly to sight read new words in English, will have enormous difficulty pronouncing the written foreign word. An unquantifiable factor, i.e., the student's concept of his lack of skill in this area, may prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy and a source of profound frustration. More than a few students of foreign languages decide that they would prefer not to have such ego-shredding experiences; they switch to something else, rather than fight.

My own experience with students of French and Spanish who have studied six months or more, is that many have acquired a fairly large passive vocabulary, but that they often hesitate even to begin to articulate a sentence in the target language. Possibly one reason for this is that they seem to think they are supposed to speak with the rapidity of native speakers speaking at normal speed on lab tapes or in films. These students cannot help but deduce that they are expected to speak at the rate of the native speaker from the very beginning. But we have been dominated too long by the audio-lingual method with its lock-step high pressure approach which grew out of the military's need to learn languages rapidly during World War II. How ironic that it was the students, reacting to the Vietnam War, who told us by their attacks on foreign language requirements that our humanistic discipline contained far too much discipline and was not sufficiently humanistic.

Another reason our students hesitate in their speech may be that they feel they should be able to speak as glibly in the target language as they do in their native tongue. But they forget that in their native tongue, they do not have to think simultaneously about vocabulary, sentence structure and pronunciation in addition to the train of thought. In the foreign language, the diversity of these elements is often too much to handle all at once. It should be no wonder that our students seem baffled about how to begin. Many students feel especially inadequate when they see that others, native speakers, the instructor and advanced students, are apparently able to deal with all these elements of speech with so much greater ease and speed than they. "Is it ever possible to come to think in the language?" beginners often ask. But what they mean is, "Is it ever possible to avoid the problems associated with performing four dif-

ferent operations simultaneously and at a rapid rate?"

RATIONALE FOR USING WRITING

"Writing maketh an exact man" said Francis Bacon[1]; his observation forms the basis of an approach which permits the student of foreign languages to eliminate all four of the problems mentioned at the beginning of this article. The rationale for this approach is that because of the nature of writing, one is obliged to (1) decrease the speed of his communication (simply because it is impossible to write--at least in longhand--as rapidly as one speaks), (2) pay attention to spelling (which leads to a consideration of phonics and pronunciation) and (3) use more formal sentence structure than is allowed in the spoken language. "But those are the concerns of the English teacher," someone might complain. True, but most of the time today's English teacher is teaching literature. Among ourselves, we as a profession should admit that the English teachers have, in large measure, ceased teaching the basic elements of language, phonics, spelling, morphology and syntax. Yet we hear ever increasingly louder laments of the inadequacy of American students in those areas. With some exceptions, possibly journalism, speech science and professional schools for acting, we are probably the only discipline concerned with human speech in its non-theoretical aspects. As a profession we often teach a great deal of the English language simultaneously with the target language. We have not, however, consciously sought to use the writing skill our students already possess to help them learn the target language, and specifically, to help them in the four problem areas identified above.

The underlying philosophy of this approach, then, is that since the literate student knows how to write, we should use that skill to help him acquire the foreign language, rather than try to teach him the language as if he were a pre-school child learning his first language. In addition, this approach, unlike the one of the audio-lingualist behaviorists, does not place a high value on rapid speech. The student is encouraged with the language at a more deliberate pace. He is not made to feel inferior for speaking slowly; he therefore feels less frustrated. The following classroom procedures show how special writing techniques allow a much greater number of students to acquire the ability to speak the language fluently and in less time than has heretofore been the case.

WRITING IN ENGLISH

During class discussion, students are allowed to express their feelings about their abilities to communicate in the language. Many express confidence in their abilities to read the language, but many also feel frustrated in the ability to speak. After these feelings have been expressed, I distribute a handout in which I explain that the problem is not always the students' inability to say something in the target language; often one may hesitate to say anything whatsoever, even in English. Rather the problem is to choose, from all the available expressions one may use, even in one's mother tongue, only one. Writing a sentence, even in English, helps one focus his thoughts and identify the first word or two of the enunciation in the target language. By committing to writing the content of the enunciation, or at least the significant parts, one is freed to concentrate on the form and pronunciation of each element of the sentence. Writing, then, helps the student filter nebulous thought through specific words, and is the first step in putting a sentence together. By writing words or abbreviations of words,[2] the student commits himself to a choice of words which eliminates the tendency to hop from one attempt to begin a sentence to another. Writing in English also permits the student to divide his thought into small and easily apprehended units upon which he can focus consecutively. It also frees him from having to deal with a concept too large to grasp in its details. The student lengthens his thought in terms of time as he writes it, becomes conscious that a sentence is a line, not an explosion, and that it should be enunciated as such. The student also receives re-inforcement, as he uses a written form of language, even if in English, that language can be analyzed; that is to say, he begins to be convinced that language is not an unbreakable code. This analysis is possible, in part, because the enunciation is not lost forever as soon as it is verbalized, but rather is frozen in space. I urge the student to make a conscious effort to visualize words in spoken communications in his other classes, and to concentrate on the visual form of the words as well as on their meaning. In some of my classes, usually one or two students had training in shorthand. I ask each of these students to note in shorthand, not only what they hear others say, but also, to record in shorthand, their own speech as they communicate. After these students demonstrate that such a procedure is possible, I ask the other students to do the same, but in longhand; i.e., to write what they say as they communicate orally. All

this is done in English. Most of the students, especially those who must write in longhand, are displeased with the procedure, and generally I must cajole and/or threaten them until they are able to see what we are doing relates to learning the language.

After using this procedure for a few days, usually no more than four or five, even for the slowest ones, the students agree that they visualize spoken words or groups of words with greater facility than was previously the case. In fact, most admit that although they knew how to write before, they are now much more conscious of the interrelationship of the spoken word and the arbitrary written symbol by which it is represented.

SPEAKING AND WRITING IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE

When this procedure has become somewhat natural to the students, I inform them that we will begin to simultaneously write and speak in the target language. The results are, for the most part, quite gratifying. As I pose my questions in the language, a student upon whom I call, hesitates, then writes, and as he writes, begins his oral response. There is a slight pause between each word, but generally each one is pronounced with confidence. The sentence seldom contains grammatical errors, because often the student corrects himself. If an error is made, correction is made and re-inforced as the correct written form replaces the incorrect form. Although his speech is slow and deliberate, the student quickly gains confidence; he begins to systematically convert his passive vocabulary, (acquired as a result of his past exposure to the language or his ability to recognize cognates) to an active vocabulary. The realization that he actually possesses the capability to make this conversion gives the student great confidence and usually brings him to a critical threshold, which I call, inappropriately, I admit, "the sound barrier." As the student has several positive experiences transferring small units from English to the target language, using his writing and visualizing abilities as aids, it dawns on him that he possesses enough active vocabulary to be able to carry on a fairly sophisticated conversation; admittedly, he will speak at a slower pace than does a native speaker, but at least he will be able to sustain a conversation without the extreme strain which a student usually undergoes with more traditional approaches. Sometimes it is necessary to urge the stu-

dent to actively search for the moment when he reaches and crosses that threshold. When he does, both he and the instructor know it--and it is an experience which is often extremely significant in the student's psychic life as a student of language.

WRITING TO REINFORCE OTHER SKILLS

Parallel to this activity, and perhaps as a tool to help those who still experience difficulties with the spoken language, either as emitter or receiver, one should of course write not only in English but also in the target language. This is an activity in which most instructors have not asked students to engage until they are well beyond the beginning stage.[3] There seem to be several reasons for this: it is argued that (1) the students will have little reason to know how to write in the language; the primary goals of today's student are reading, speaking and understanding; (2) if learning to speak the language is difficult, learning to write it is even more so, since one must be concerned with many rules which are not of concern to the speaker; (3) since we learn to speak our native tongue long before we learn to write it, we should follow the same procedure with the foreign language. The audio-lingual experience has taught us that if the student is not allowed to experience the printed word, he is led to consider the target language, to a great degree, as a composite of nonsense syllables. If he learns to read the language, his vocabulary still remains in the passive mode, generally. In both cases, his grasp of the language is extremely tenuous and fragile, and easily lost. But if writing in the foreign language, even if this means copying material from the book, at the beginning, is an integral part of the student's learning activities, he is more easily able to fix the language in his mind. The nonsense syllables acquire significance when the student freezes them in a visual form which he himself has created. An expression the student has written himself is less likely to be pronounced sloppily than one which he parrots back in the language lab. The hand holding the pen becomes an extension of the speech organs, but what it lacks in speed, it makes up for in accuracy, or the possibility to attain accuracy. With accuracy comes greater comprehension and confidence which leads to the ability to communicate in a natural and relaxed style. Writing then, be it closely controlled or completely free, can help the student acquire the active vocabulary which both he and we want him to have. It is interesting to note in this connec-

tion that making the transfer from writing in English to writing in the target language is much less traumatic than going from not writing at all to writing in the language without the intermediary step of writing in English.

Our profession is beginning to make adjustments to the difficulties we have faced over the past several years. We are now much more open-minded to innovation than we used to be. The ideas just described are hardly new; because they have not been discussed a great deal in the literature, however, they may appear to be new. Yet one cannot help believing that many in the profession have been using them for many years. Apologies are offered to those innovators and additional ideas requested of them. For the "uninitiated," this technique might be used as a stepping stone towards the implementation of a more realistic foreign language program which makes it possible for the student to pass from a stage of generally passive control of the language to one of active control.

NOTES

[1] Of Studies.

[2] In my article "Increasing Conversational Ability through Stenography," I discuss using abbreviations of words as a key to developing proficiency in a foreign language. The article has been accepted for publication by The Modern Language Journal.

[3] Exceptions, however, are "Written Assignments--Valid Reinforcers of Speaking and Understanding", Guenter Pfister, Foreign Language Annals 7(1974): 421-424; "Could the New Key be a Wrong Key?", Theodore H. Mueller, French Review 44(1971):1085-1093; Découverte et Création (Teacher's Manual), Gérard Gian and Ralph M. Hester, Rand McNally Publishing Company, New York, 1974.